Book Review: Br(e)aking the News: Journalism, Politics and New Media edited by Janey Gordon, Paul Rowinski and Gavin Stewart

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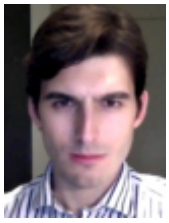

What is the breaking news in the world today? How did you find out this news? How do you know it is true? Was it reported ethically? What checks and balances are being put on the news media? ***Br(e)aking the News*** *seeks to answer these questions, with chapters exploring the use of the mobile phone to access news in sub-Saharan Nigeria, the role of media magnates in presenting political views in Europe, and Wikipedia's representation of conflict.* ***Stephen Minas*** *finds that this book makes a valuable contribution to the study of an industry in flux.*

Br(e)aking the News: Journalism, Politics and New Media. Janey Gordon, Paul Rowinski and Gavin Stewart (eds). Peter Lang Publishing. September 2013.

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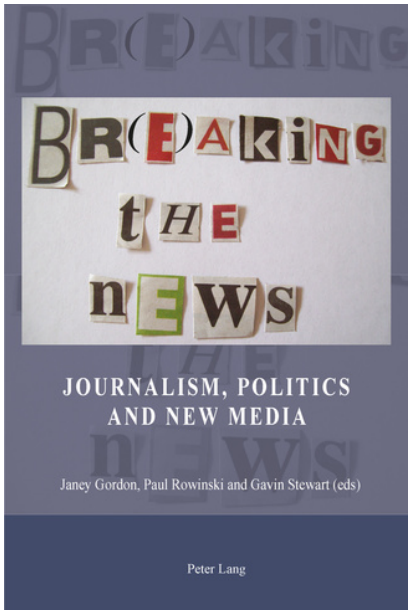

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The profound change taking place in the news industry is a complex story, but the summary looks like this: on the one hand, the rise of social media, digital platforms, 'citizen journalism' and the handheld Internet; on the other, newspapers closing and journalists being laid off as traditional revenues shrink, with ever greater pressure piled on the 'old media' organisations still i business.

Although a separate development, the phone hacking scandal centred on the *News of the World* amplified the sense of crisi surrounding the traditional press, at least in the UK. The spectacle of reporters taking notes at their own trial at the Old Baile underscored the extent to which the news media has itself become the story.

Br(e)aking the News: Journalism, Politics and New Media examines how new (or newly available) technologies are changing how content is produced and consumed. It also engages with the broad questions of ethics, regulation, quality and journalism education that confront the industry. The editors – Janey Gordon, Paul Rowinski and Gavin Stewart – are journalism and media academics at the University of Bedfordshire. They have assembled a diverse group of academics and journalists to investigate these issues. The chapters move from phone hacking and the British press, to the impact of technological change in a variety of developed and developing countries, to the challenges raised by new media for teachers of journalism.

The book's opening chapters examine the phone hacking scandal from a number of angles, including Rupert Murdoch's testimony before the Leveson Inquiry and press lobbying to keep self-regulation in the face of successive critical inquiries.

The scrutiny of the British press continues in a chapter in which Rowinski contrasts eurosceptic copy in newspapers owned by Murdoch and Silvio Berlusconi. Rowinski argues that for all the global reach of new media, nations still the see world 'through their own prisms' and newspapers reflect those national points of view. He presents Murdoch's *Times* and Berlusconi's *Giornale* playing to 'two very different Euroscepticisms'. When Irish voters rejected the European Union's Lisbo

treaty in 2008, *The Times* headline was: 'Irish voters sign death warrant for EU treaty; European leaders look for way round decisive rejection'. In *Il Giornale*, however, an article on the Irish referendum lamented a noble ideal that had been 'communicated badly': 'Europe was a dream … It was the common market as an ambassador of peace'.

Another chapter examines the influence on public policy of sensationalist reporting on human rights legislation and the EU ('45,000 Crooks On Way Here' claimed a *Sun* headline on Romania and Bulgaria joining the EU, while another *Sun* article attacked the British government for being 'in thrall to human rights'). Jon Silverman concludes that 'the citizens of a mature democracy deserve something better'.

The potential for digital platforms, social media, handheld devices and disintermediation in general to bring 'something better by better informing and engaging 'the people formerly known as the audience' , is explored in the pages that follow. However there are also examples of the enduring relevance of journalism's 'core values', the shortcomings of User Generated Conten and the pitfalls of relying on social media (during Iran's so-called 'Twitter revolution', there were reportedly 'fewer than 1,000 Twitter users in all of Iran').

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book's middle chapters investigate the impacts of, and reactions to, changes in the media landscape in a diverse set of case studies. These range from how the rapidly increased take-up of mobile phones in Nigeria is expanding access to radio and other media, to what it means to be a sports journalist when players and clubs can communicate directly with their supporter on Twitter. Other chapters present findings on how Twitter directs traffic to Australian news websites, on how Arab journalists used Twitter during the Arab Spring, and on censorship of news portals in China.

This eclectic collection of case studies challenges both 'overly simplistic thinking about media change' (old versus new) and the tendency to confine analysis of media trends to exclusively Western – or exclusively English-speaking – contexts.

The chapter by Ali Usman Saleem and Sayeeda Syed illustrates the importance of cultural and technological contexts. Saleem and Syed analyse the Taliban's use of radio in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas to spread propaganda and to control and terrorise local communities. In 2009 the BBC reported that there were about 150 'militant' stations broadcasting in northern Pakistan. The illegal stations broadcast extremist religious sermons, issue instructions and announce punishments. In remote areas where most people are illiterate and do not understand Urdu, Pakistan's national language, the authors find that the Taliban, broadcasting in local languages and dialects, has established 'an unchallenged rule on the airwaves'.

Saleem and Syed report that almost fifty percent of respondents to their survey listened to the stations to 'remain up-to-date' with Taliban policies and instructions, while around 30 percent stated they had no alternative but to listen. Some three quarters of respondents blamed the stations for causing 'a rise in uncontrolled violence', including (in the words of one respondent) by 'spreading hatred against … those whom they deemed infidels or impure Muslims'.

In its context, the influence of Taliban radio stations is a 'new media' story – the result of the Taliban making a 'very effective' transition from loudspeakers to illegal radio. With FM transmitters costing as little as $60, the barriers to entry were low. The authors conclude that radio 'remains a very strong tool for social change' in the tribal areas.

Some might criticise *Br(e)aking the News* for ranging too widely by including chapters on both the phone hacking crisis and the impact of new media. The failures of British press self-regulation and the reprehensible practices of elements of the tabloid press are distinct from the broader forces reshaping news media globally. Indeed, as Kate Ironside observes in her chapter, the then-Press Council was dismissed as 'Ombudsmice' in Parliament as early as 1989, long before the new media innovations considered in other chapters. Nevertheless, both issues give rise to the book's central concerns of ethics, standards and regulation in a time of change. Moreover, the chapters on the British press are just as relevant as the case studies from Pakistan and Nigeria to the editors' case for thinking about the media as a series of 'culturally embedded systems'.

In itself, disruptive change in the media is nothing new ('the world has gone along perfectly well for 6,000 years without printing and has no need to change now', one opponent of new media declared in the fifteenth century). It has happened before, each time attended by a cast of proponents, opponents and those who insist that things can stay the same . Today, technological change has again sharply divided opinion, and is again posing ethical questions and challenging established practices.

By exploring these issues in a series of focused research papers, *Br(e)aking the News* makes a valuable contribution to the study of an industry in flux. It would be a useful text for journalism courses. The debate about the future of news is often characterised by sweeping statements. This text offers instead a rich store of telling details – a quality it shares with good journalism, whether it appears in old media or new.

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Stephen Minas is a research associate with the Foreign Policy Centre, London and an honorary fellow of the Centre for International Mental Health, University of Melbourne. Stephen was previously an adviser in the Office of the Premier of the Australian state of Victoria and has also worked as a journalist and as a staffer for members of the Australian Parliament. Stephen holds an MSc in International Relations from the LSE, where he studied on a Graduate Merit Award, and Honours degrees in Law and History from the University of Melbourne. He tweets @StephenMinas. Read more reviews by Stephen .